

Theater: New York Musical Theater Festival 2013 Part 1: Shipwrecks, Sisters And Spies!

Posted: 07/19/2013 12:01 am

The New York Musical Theatre Festival is celebrating its 10th anniversary in typical fashion: by hosting more than 50 events ranging from showcases and readings to dozens of fully staged new musicals in a three week period. Running through July 28, NYMF is always sure to offer one or two shows that rank among the best of the year, along with numerous works in progress that show promise and if nothing else the chance to see some of New York's most talented actors sink their teeth into a brand new show. They've launched several Broadway shows, a clutch of Off Broadway hits and literally countless productions around the world. Best of all, at \$25 for tickets, it's also one of the best bargains in town and a great way to fill the summer void between the Tony Awards and the new fall season.

As a bonus, this year most of the shows are being performed at the handsome Signature Theatre Company (which has four different stages) and their original home now proudly boasting Pearl Theatre Company. So most of the shows are literally one block away from each other on 42nd St. Here's my first report on this season's offerings.

SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON ** out of ****

DIZZY MISS LIZZIE'S ROADSIDE REVUE PRESENTS THE BRONTES * 1/2

MATA HARI IN 8 BULLETS *** out of ****

SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON ** out of ****

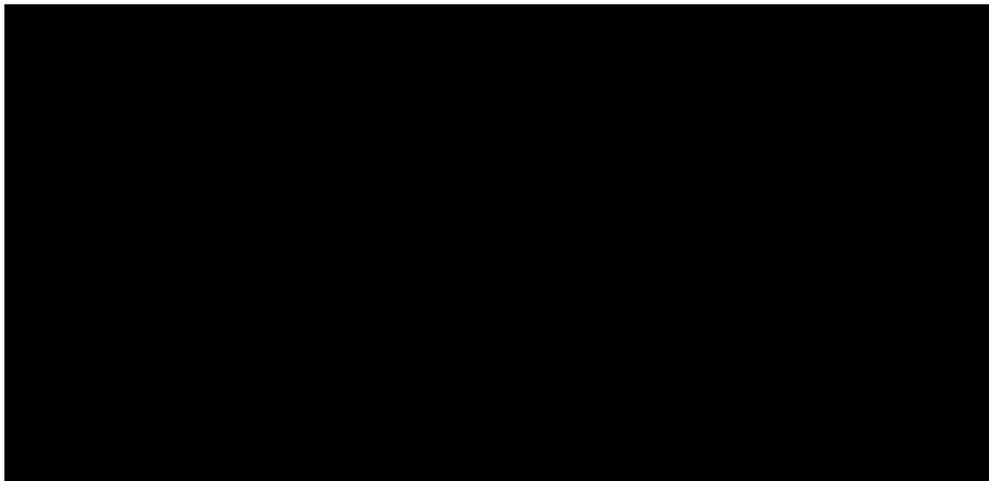
NYMF AT SIGNATURE

You can't really fault a show for not being faithful to the novel *Swiss Family Robinson*. The original tale is fairly dull going, a useful manual if you really are stranded on a desert island and want to read descriptions of farming and building tools and the such (mixed in with a lot of praying and piety) but rather dull in general. But the "family shipwrecked on an isle" story is too engaging a concept and so *Swiss Family Robinson* has been expanded and contracted over the centuries, dumbed down for kids (who might be shocked at the constant slaughter of animals in the original; hey a family's gotta eat!), stripped of its moralizing, juiced up in the action by Disney and so on.

Still, this new musical by the brothers Kennedy does lose sight of the basic appeal of this story: a family surviving and learning to depend on each other on a deserted island. (Patrick and John did the book, John did the music and lyrics, Walter did the choreography and Patrick directed.) Their island is bursting with so many characters -- from French sailors who are NOT pirates to school girls who are being raised in an Amazonian-style by their mistress -- that the poor Robinsons might well search out another *more* deserted island to get some peace.

The minimal staging and choreography add little to the story, but the story is less isolated survival and more Gilbert & Sullivan romp. The Robinsons are stranded on an island after their ship is capsized in a storm. It's lucky in a way since they were being threatened by dread French sailors, who have a young man in captivity they hope to ransom. That young man is actually a girl (the very appealing Jessie Shelton), who has been adventuring with her father all over the world and isn't about to let some French fools stop her from getting away.

They're all on the island where schoolgirls are running around in odd native garb, encouraged in their heathen ways by a mistress who has taken advantage of their earlier shipwreck (this island is quite the busy way station) to teach the gals independence and a forthright disdain of the male species. Men. Who needs 'em? That lasts about one second after the girls get their first glimpse of the Robinson lads.





And no wonder. The handsome young Robinson men come in handy stereotypes: Fritz is stolid and dependable (Sergio Pasquariello), Ernst is the brainiac (an amusing Michael Lorz) and Jack is the black sheep who isn't so bad, really (a charming Matt Mundy). Jack and Emily fall in love at first sight, the French are easily taunted and everyone is reconciled by the finale in unremarkable fashion. Barely a moment is wasted in actually having to survive on this island (a brief interlude shows the family building their home in the trees). Taken on its own, it's a none-too-convincing romp with so many subplots the plot never really gets started.

On the plus side, Elisa Van Duyne and Paul DeBoy have good chemistry as Elizabeth and John, the parents of the lads. Van Duyne has a sweet voice and a strong presence. DeBoy however has a notably weak voice unfortunately exposed by his brief solo moments as quite inadequate. Patrick Oliver Jones has more dash as the French sailor Francois DuBois and James Patterson does what he can with the sidekick Spoo. The stranded schoolgirls and their mistress have such nonsense to deliver, it's hardly worth mentioning.

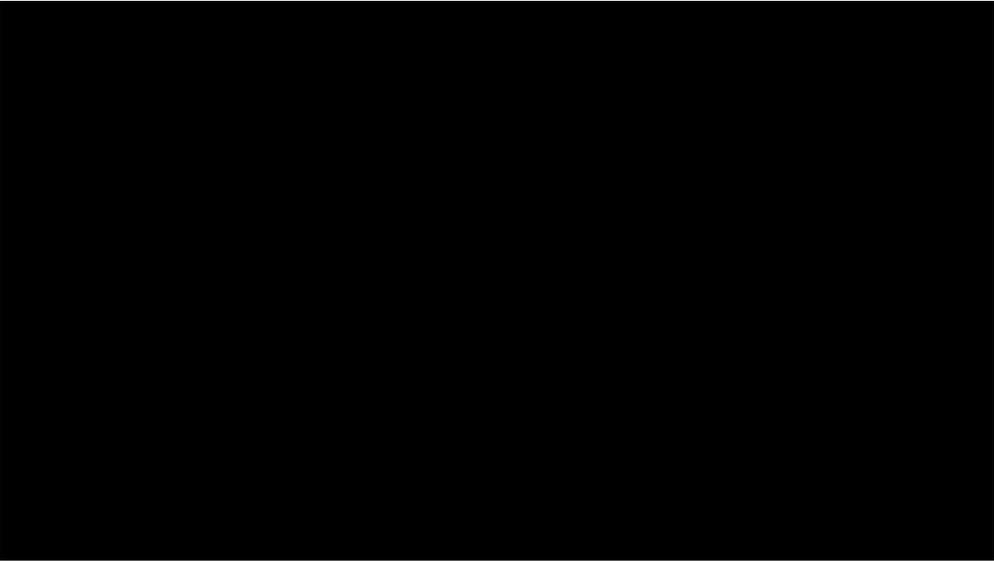
Among the songs, few make an impression. However, Shelton makes the most of the show's most consistently comic number, "It's Not Like Madagascar," which determinedly and successfully apes G&S. It's easy to see why Jack falls hard and their scenes together are the show's brightest moments. Van Duyne sings so sweetly, she almost makes "Upon This Peaceful Little Island" seem memorable too.

All in all, generally weak songs can't bring to life this haphazard tale. Those who are shipwrecked must patch together whatever is at hand to survive. But the brothers Kennedy had all of musical theater to pull from so this mish-mash of a tale has no such defense. They were lucky to attract a talented cast that gives this piece what little life it has.

DIZZY MISS LIZZIE'S ROADSIDE REVUE PRESENTS THE BRONTES * 1/2 NYMF AT SIGNATURE

A rock and roll musical about The Brontes, that famous trio of writing siblings? Bring it on. Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Revue is a loose-limbed collective that takes those talented sisters as an excuse for this very casual stage show. They have energy to spare but a lot more effort was put into their general banter than the actual story they're trying to (sort of) tell and it shows.

The conceit, such as it is, is to have the Brontes sisters and their brother tell their stories. Sometimes we get morose comments about illness and lack of attention, other times we get rundowns of plot, still other times we get silly jibes about how boring *Jane Eyre* is or how no one ever reads *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It has an intentional juvenile air with siblings sniping at each other and the band piling on the in-jokes. But that sort of thing works much better when you sense a deep appreciation or at least understanding of the work being parodied and poked fun at. Here, the jokes never stray deeper than the sort of one-liner even the most casual observer might come up with.



Essentially, the siblings line up at microphones, trade jokes and sing their songs. Too often, the songs are only vaguely related to the subject at hand. Gillian Shelly has charisma to spare as the Gypsy, but even she can't make sense out of vague nonsense like "Breathe In," an early mood-setter that leaves you wondering what all this has to do with the Brontes.

Each sibling gets a chance in the spotlight, ended by the tiresome joke of the Ferryman coming to take them away while blaring appropriate music on his boombox. Though the show is only about 80 minutes, you're soon looking forward to his return, even though it will be punctuated by that bad gag and an extended goodbye where we have to tearfully wave the actor off the stage. On the rare instance where song and story are actually linked, it works! Because "God Knows" really does dive into the emotions of the drunkard Bronte brother known as Patrick Branwell, actor Matthew Schleigh has the show's best moment.

The other actors are game and I suspect under better circumstances they too would shine. But some high school jibes mixed with too many tunes that have nothing to do with much of anything but the loosey-goosey vibe that Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Revue

clearly savors are not the setting for them to do so.

MATA HARI IN 8 BULLETS *** out of ****
NYMF AT SIGNATURE

Certain to be one of the best shows of NYMF, *Mata Hari In 8 Bullets* is an ambitious, captivating song cycle that will surely improve as it is performed and refined. My expectations were high since it stars Onalea Gilbertson, whose own song cycle *Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Wild Prairie Dame* was one of the best shows of 2011. (Note that I said it was not just one of the best shows from that year's NYMF but one of the best shows of the year, period.)

Here she stars in what is essentially a one woman show, though Gilbertson interacts a bit with her excellent backing band, including the talented and handsome Josh Henderson on violin as an excellent musical foil. Gilbertson's distinctive, charming voice bristles with intelligence and captures your attention effortlessly. You always sit up and pay notice when she's singing.



But first the show (conceived and composed by David Rhymer with lyrics by Blake Brooker & Rhymer with additional lyrics by Edward Knoll) begins with Gilbertson simply talking. She lays out the life of Mata Hari in brief, compelling terms that kept the audience spellbound. From a rough childhood to marriage to a fat drunken abusive man to escaping to Europe where she reinvented herself as an exotic dancer (*very* exotic, since stripping in polite company was a novelty even in risque Paris) to the most despised woman in the world when she was executed as a spy. (The show keeps the romantic notion that she was wrongly convicted.)

Gilbertson's acting is effortless here and this biographical sketch is essential information for what follows. They are the eight bullets from the firing squad that killed Mata Hari, each one announced by a jolting sound effect and burst of light, each one leading Mata Hari back in time to sing about the various stages of her life. Thanks to the opening monologue (which would make a good acting piece all on its own), the audience is primed to know exactly what Mata Hari is singing about when Gilbertson delivers "My Face Burns" and "People Of Berlin," "Life Is A Story That You Write" and other numbers.

The stage craft on display is top notch; Peter Schneider directed the team that included subtle lighting by Zach Blane, sexy costumes by Janell Berte and appropriate choreography by Odette Heyn that never calls too much attention to itself as Gilbertson weaves from story to monologue to performance as the cabaret star Mata Hari.

Certainly you know a show has worked when you leave it wanting to read more about the person it was about. But *Mata Hari in 8 Bullets* will be even better when it trims away one or two of the public performance songs, the numbers where we see Mata Hari wooing an international audience and earning her fame. I think it needs just a little more insight into the woman behind the performer, the woman that fell for one more man in uniform who disowned her once scandal broke, the woman who was drawn to powerful men in a way that doomed her to a spectacular death.

It's already a triumph for Gilbertson; the show is tailor made to her skills as both a singer and actress. The more challenging and intelligent the material, the better she brings it to life. Mata Hari is a complex creature. But you only need one or two songs with Gilbertson in full cabaret mode to believe she became famous around the world. If they peek behind that public facade just a little bit more, this show will rise from provocative and stimulating to genuinely moving. All we need is a little less Mata Hari and a little more Margaretha Zelle.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2

Picnic * 1/2

Opus No. 7 ** 1/2

Deceit * 1/2

Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2

The Jammer ***

Blood Play ** 1/2

Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2

Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions

are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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